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North Texas couple killed in balloon crash near Lockhart, report says



Austin and state ask for public's help reducing waste in city waterways

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7:15 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 20, 2012 | Filed in: **Local**

With a handful of Austin streams failing to meet state limits on fecal contamination, officials are starting a public process to help reduce waste in the water.

For years, the streams have exceeded the state limits. Faulty sewage infrastructure, left-behind dog droppings, wildlife feces and human waste are to blame, say city officials. According to state rules, the current bacteria levels indicate an increased health risk for swimming or wading in the waters.

The most heavily contaminated stream appears to be Waller Creek, where average fecal indicator bacteria averaged 797 colonies per 100 milliliters of water, according to samples taken as recently as 2011, the latest available.

The limit for E. coli, the bacteria used to indicate fecal concentrations, is 126.

Such thresholds are “protective and very conservative,” said Chris Herrington, an environmental engineer with the city of Austin. Exceeding them, he said, “doesn’t mean an immediate health risk.”

Though very few strains of E. coli are pathogenic, they serve as indicators of the likelihood of pathogens such as salmonella or streptococci, which are much harder to detect. Research has found that the most-common illness associated with swimming in water polluted by sewage, is gastroenteritis, which can cause vomiting, diarrhea, headache and fever. Ear, eye, nose and throat infections can also result from swimming in contaminated water.



Guillermo Hernandez Martinez

A beer can floats in Waller Creek where it winds through Shipe Park Tuesday. The creek is among a handful of Austin streams failing to meet state limits on fecal contamination.

Herrington said Austinites should wait at least several days after a storm, which washes fecal matter into streams, before

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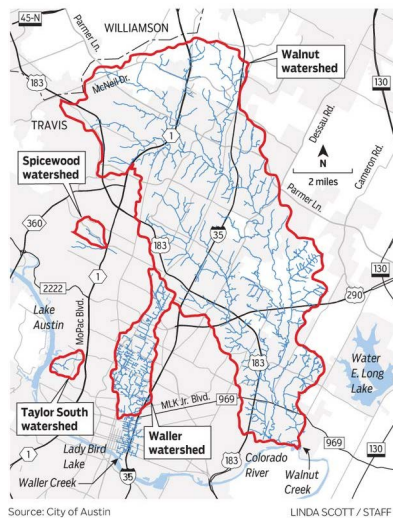
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entering any water body.

At one sampling site, on 24th Street and Waller, the creek was found to average a concentration of 1,014 over 27 samples taken between 2008 and 2010, according to a city report. At another site, by Third Street and Waller Creek, similar sampling turned up an average of 987.

“Strong odors of urine and feces were normally evident at this site,” said the

February analysis by Austin’s watershed protection division, which linked the odors to a homeless encampment.

City officials have succeeded recently in moving a trio of creeks off the state’s list of troubled creeks. But four are still in violation: Spicewood Creek in Northwest Austin and Taylor South Creek in West Austin have been on the list since 2002; Waller since 2004 and Walnut Creek in North and East Austin since 2006, he said.

Impaired creeks must be addressed within 13 years, and with the state bumping up against federal limits on how long creeks can be on the list, city and state officials are turning to the public for help.

A meeting next week on the issue is hosted by the city, state and the University of Texas’ Center for Public Policy Dispute Resolution.

Educating people about picking up pet waste and encouraging folks to report environmental issues is part of the effort, Herrington said. The city environmental 24-hour hotline is 974-2550.

“This is a water quality problem that potentially affects all of us,” he said.

THE CITY IS CO-HOSTING A PUBLIC FORUM TO DISCUSS CONTAMINATION OF AUSTIN WATERWAYS AT 6:30 P.M. ON NOV. 28 AT ONE TEXAS CENTER, ROOM 325, 505 BARTON SPRINGS ROAD. FREE PARKING AVAILABLE.

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